

ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - CHARLIE GLADSTONE (Katie Elliott & Charlie Gladstone)

My guest on today's show is Charlie Gladstone, co-founder of *The Good Life Experience*, host of *The Mavericks Podcast* and author of *The Family Guide to the Great Outdoors*. If you can hear noises in the background of our conversation, that's because Charlie and I met for coffee at *Pedlars General Store* in Notting Hill, one of a number of businesses he runs alongside his wife, Caroline.

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Charlie Gladstone, thank you so much for having a conversation with me today. It's really lovely to meet you in person.

Thanks Katie. Well, I'm used to being on the other end of this, so it feels quite weird. I'm not sure I've ever done a podcast as such.

You haven't done a podcast?

I've not been a guest, I don't think. I don't think so.

Well, not only am I using my new recording equipment for the first time today, but this is your first guest podcast.

Exactly.

So I'm very excited.

Anyway...

So I'm intrigued. I think you know about me that I'm busily trying to understand how people can enjoy their lives a little bit more. So I'm curious to ask you about *The Good Life Experience*, but particularly to ask you - what, for you, constitutes a good life?

It's really interesting, this. I've been self employed for just about 30 years and it's been 30 years of really hard work. You know, I oversee 24 smallish businesses that range from about £150,000 a year turnover to about 5 million. And I've got six children who are now all essentially grown up - the youngest is 18. And I work very, very hard. But I think the essence of the good life, and that's what I've had, is that I am free. I'm my own boss and I stand or I fall on what I do. And I think this is the distinction between being self-employed and being under somebody else's paycheck, it's that I can choose to do what I want. So that, I think, is, you know, a long-winded answer.

So freedom?

Freedom. The freedom to make your own choices, to alter the course of your life, to be nimble. The freedom even, just to jump off the edge. I mean, I think my wife and I have one sort of philosophy that I think we've only just really identified as such, which is that we jump off the edge. We moved house when the children were very young, to Scotland.

We gave up our jobs, we've started endless businesses and ventures and we've had six children and we've said, "How do we afford this? How we do this?" And we jump off the edge and we kind of make it up as we go along. I wrote a book last year just for my children about my life so far. I'm the son of a headmaster and my dad was headmaster at a big private school when I was born and I was taught to swim, aged about two, by being thrown into a swimming pool. And I was writing this book and I suddenly thought, this is really interesting. This is kind of how I've lived my life. And I don't have any memory of that, other than kind of the memory of the tale. But you know, this guy, who was obviously, I think in memory, a sort of big, bald, ex-military swimming instructor, got me and kind of like, you know, "Here's the little nipper, chuck him into the pool". And I think that that served us really, really well, that sense of kind of having to make it up. And I think that impatience is a virtue that you really need to have to be self-employed. You've got to just say, I don't want to talk about this too much, I'm just going to kind of jump off and make it up.

So are you someone who says yes to things before you know how you're going to be able to do them?

100% yes. And often of course that puts me in in difficult positions. And in fact I had to say no to something having said yes to it just the other day... But I am very lucky. I mean, I'm very privileged. I mean unlike you, I stuck at university, I went to a great university, I stuck at it and I had the privilege before that of having an amazing private education and I'm not gonna apologise for that. I was really, really lucky. But I think that what that gave me is just an enormous blank canvas in life. So I'm not saying everyone has that blank canvas, but I did. I went to Eton and Oxford, you know, kind of classic education and everyone goes, "Ooh, it's really embarrassing I went to Eton". Well, my view on it is the opposite. I think I was really, really lucky. And really, really lucky to go to Oxford. And it gave me this amazing blank canvas. And so now I just feel like if someone says to me, "Are you interested in in this?" You know, "Do you want to talk about this?" I just think, "Yeah, come on". You know, "Why not, get the energy?" I seem to have absolutely no fear of failure whatsoever.

So when I went to Cambridge, I'd had a comprehensive school education and I was the first person in my family to go to university and I didn't necessarily feel like I was the right sort of person to be there. But what I noticed was that some people, it was as if they had a sense that it was right for them to be there. And it felt a bit as though some people's earlier experience in life had left them with a confidence and a - I'm resisting using the word a sense of entitlement because I think that has very negative connotations and that's not what I'm trying to say... What I'm interested in is not what some people have that other people don't have and criticising those who do have it. What I'm interested in is, how can we all have a bit more of that sense of being allowed to be where we are and say yes to possibility in the way that you're describing?

What an interesting question. I mean I often think about this. I think it came from my father and not from my mother, who I think was much less involved in us really. My father's thing was just to try to allow us to find one or two things that we were passionate about and then to put, to place no judgement whatsoever on what they were. So I grew up as being passionate really, principally, about pop music and then about football. My father

had not the slightest interest in pop music. I mean I think even the Beatles completely went over his head, but what he said is, you know, when we can find that thing, I'm just going to really support it and I'm going to pretend I'm interested when you're talking about, you know, The Clash or Bob Marley, that I was sort of obsessed with. So that kind of gave me - that legitimised that. And I think that it's that kind of thing of - you're going to be something.

So a kind of trust that within you there was something that would blossom, that there was some interest or passion that you would follow and you would do wonderful things with it? A kind of faith that no matter what that was, you had that contained within you and it was simply a question of creating the right environment that that could be found and nurtured?

Yes, I think that's right. And in many ways, I was at an enormous advantage in having an amazing education, which I think is partly why I think that the catalyst to change is education. Which means that actually everyone is amazing, just some of us get more opportunities to be amazing in conventional ways. And I think that my education kind of gave me permission to be so. But I mean you very rarely, if you talk to anyone, come across people who aren't just kind of interesting in some way. I'm certainly not here to, you know, in any way kind of, and I haven't even thought about the notion of suggesting how society might do things better. But I think, as individuals, it's just to kind of understand that everyone is valuable. Everyone is, you know, a valuable human being, whether they're the Prime Minister or the dustbin person, they're just as valuable as each other. And just to treat people in that way. Constant acts of sort of kindness, compassion, thoughtfulness really are life changing. And if you go into a shop and you know, someone's having a bad day and you just say, you know, "How are you? Thanks so much, that's really nice". You know, you can actually change people's lives, because we don't say that often enough. I mean it's often said, I think, that praise is an option for children, but very rarely do adults say, "By the way, I think what you're doing is really amazing and, you know, good for you for all that you've done". And that doesn't have to be because you've won the Nobel Prize. It can be because you've served someone a nice coffee or or whatever. We can be kind, we can be compassionate, we can be gentle, we can be generous. It's often seen to be a bad thing to be a people-pleaser, but I can't for the life of me imagine why. I mean occasionally it means that it's a bit hard work on you, but life's kind of hard work for all of us all the time. But I mean I just think, I think that I would prefer a working environment or a home environment where people are fundamentally happy. And actually we were saying before we'd started to talk on tape here, you were saying how people had told you how friendly *The Good Life Experience* is, our festival. And actually it is without question the number one thing that people say about it, and I'd say we are probably the friendliest festival anywhere. And we've done that entirely subconsciously. And I think that's just because we greet our guests with our eyes and we thank them for coming and we value them. You know, they can see that we're doing our best even if we're not perfect, that we are actually really doing our best. And if there's a blocked loo over there, they'll as likely see one of us trying to fix it as you know, we won't just be ignoring it. And I think, you know, that again, it's just, "Thank you for coming. Welcome". You know, I like doing that. As much as I hope that it does good for other people, I'm not going around trying to kind of just be a good bloke.

When you're saying you're not doing it just to be nice, you know, that there's a benefit...

Yes.

...that you benefit from being nice? It's a bit like, I spent many, many years being extremely self-punishing on the inside thinking that I could treat myself appallingly whilst being a good parent, whilst being a good friend, whilst being, you know, kind to the people that I loved. I really was confused about that for the longest time. And it has been such a surprise to me to come out the other side of that and discover that by putting my own needs first and doing things that previously I would have described as selfish but actually taking good care of myself, there's a knock-on benefit, which is that I am actually much nicer to other people and much nicer to be around. And it's almost, by behaving well, by treating people with respect, whether it's ourselves or others, there's a net gain overall that we don't always recognise.

I think that's right. Actually, I mean, very interesting and I agree and I don't think I've been terribly good in my life at looking after myself. And there's one thing that I'll come to in a moment, which I think is interesting, but I think we have to also accept that life is full of ups and downs and that whoever we are, however we might - what's the word doctors use - present? However we might present, you know, all of us have got our troubles and I think if we can understand that, being kind of yourself is a whole lot easier. The one real lesson that I think is for me the biggest kindness that I can have to myself is being organised. I can't deal with kind of chaos around me. So I'm never late for anything. I never miss anything. I've got lists. I very rarely lose my car keys. You know, I may not appear it at first, but I'm super-organised and that is a massive kindness. And I just find that, you know, to be tidy-ish, to have lists, to do what you say you'll do, to reply to email, you know, to try to keep on top of things, and particularly not to lose stupid things always at the point that you need them, is a real kindness to yourself.

I'm just picking up on 'to do what you say you'll do'. That's one I learned late in life. Of course there are times when we genuinely can't do things, but I talk quite a lot in the work that I do about bright line rules and the advantage of creating rules for ourselves about what we will and won't do, which are very clear whether you've broken them or not.

Right. So such as?

So here's an example, a bright line rule might be that I won't write a work email after 7:00pm on a weekday, let's say.

Yeah.

Basically it's something where you've thought about what is helpful and unhelpful for you in terms of behaviour and then, rather than relying on yourself to remember that in a moment when you might be tired or stressed or distracted and relying on willpower to execute that plan, what you do is you simply make that rule. So let's say I make the rule, I'm not going to send a work email after 7:00pm and I get to 7:10pm and I remember an email I should have sent. Well, generally speaking, if I've made that rule, then I'm going to think, well, it's 7:10, it's going to have to wait till tomorrow.

Yeah.

I mean it reduces your cognitive load because you don't have to constantly be making decisions.

Yeah, I think it's absolutely true.

And I think I had allowed a lot of space for deciding whether or not I felt like something. There was a lot of lee-way for me. "Do I feel that I could do today? Do I feel like it?" And one of the things I think I've been systematically doing during the process of recovering has been learning to be quite clear with myself about what I'm gonna do and only if it's really genuinely not possible or not advisable when it comes to it, will I change my plans. And I've found extraordinary benefit from that and I would love to have learned that earlier.

But I think this is, you know, really interesting. And I think that 'bright line' is a really nice word or phrase, whichever one it is, but I think that this thing about doing what you say you'll do is part of your duty to the world at large. If you say you're going to follow up with an email in the next 48 hours, do it. Don't say I'll follow up with an email in 10 minutes. But you know, just do it. And that's kind of doing to others as you would have done to yourself, which of course is the route of customer service. Actually. I mean it's not one of the 10 commandments is it? But it's kind of a sort of religious thing.

Do what you say you will do?

No, do to others as you would like to have done to yourself.

Oh I see. Yeah. But you know what I found the most interesting thing about it is that, I mean sure, if you do what you say you're going to do then that reduces flakiness which makes you an easier person to work with, interact with.

But also it's bloody annoying if someone doesn't do it.

Yeah, definitely. So, I mean it's good in terms of how your relationships with other people are and how they perceive you and feel about doing stuff with you. That's good. But I found that the greatest benefit was in terms of how I felt about myself. So when I started really consistently showing up and doing what I said I would do, even when I didn't feel like it, it had a massive impact on my self confidence...

Isn't that interesting?

...because I started to feel like the kind of person who could do what they said they would do even if they didn't want to.

Yes.

And that was a great big shift in my thinking. And on top of that, it reduced the amount of energy and effort that I was wasting, because what used to happen for me was I would approach something that I found a bit daunting or maybe I wasn't sure I wanted to do. Maybe in some unguarded moment I'd said yes to doing something.

Yeah.

And then the moment approached and it became more and more terrifying and I thought, can I do it? Like, you know, giving a talk. Like the *Do Lectures*.

Yeah.

As the moment approached my fear increased and the number of times in my head, the thought passed across behind my eyeballs, "Maybe I could just not do this." You know, it went through my head. But the difference is for me now and was for me back then, that that wasn't an option. I was going to have to find a way through it, which meant that instead of spending an awful lot of time thinking, "How could I get out of that thing that I've said yes to that I didn't really want to do?", which can take, you can spend hours and days literally...

You know, there is, there is truth in that old fridge magnet about doing something every day that, you know, frightens you.

Yeah.

And I think, you know, there are two interesting things here. And for me, I equate them both, by coincidence, to running. So I've been a runner ever since I was about 15 years old. And actually the most difficult thing about running is getting out the front door, or the first mile. And then the other thing is that in October of last year I did a half marathon with four of my children and one of my daughters' fiancé, and my daughter and I were the only ones who have done marathons and half marathons before, my elder daughter. And on the morning we were in Amsterdam and the children were like, "I don't want to do it. It's a nightmare." And I said, "That's the whole point of this! This would be a completely pointless weekend if we all got up in the morning and we were like, 'Man, I so want to do this, you know, I'm so looking, it's going to be so easy' because it wouldn't be a challenge". So you know, you've got to really drink up that, "I don't want to do it" because that makes the reward when you have done it tenfold. And that is that thing of confidence growing in increments. You know, I actually really enjoy the public speaking thing and actually your talk at the *Do Lectures* was infinitely better than my one and beautifully presented and paced. But look what it's led to. You know, you've made loads of new friends. You're now working with Do on other things. You know, you and I are talking and I hope that we can do more things together, so if you'd just stayed in bed that day or stayed at home, you know...

And don't you find that the more you learn to push through those things, that that feeling of discomfort, like they had prior to the half marathon or perhaps I had prior to the talk - I now can see it for what it is and I know that if I can just keep on going and come out the other side of that, it unlocks something much bigger that I can't see.

Yes. That's very interesting. You see, I think that I'm someone who has had an enormous kind of self confidence for a long time and a big, and a massive range of experience. But what I've identified in myself is that until not very long ago, I was very scared of trying things that I didn't think I'd be good at because I thought that would damage my self, the image that others had of myself. So I relearned how to ski, well Caroline and I both did

when we were about 45, so I'm 55 now, and the first few days I was laughably sort of pathetic, sort of old man kind of falling over every few seconds, you know? And then of course in three or four days I was going and actually I'm sure I didn't look like somebody who'd done it all their life, but I was perfectly good at it within a week. But I realised that actually no one goes past going, "Nyah, look at him!" No one could actually care less and so then I kind of embarked on this sort of thing of trying to do things that really scared me. Like I went hang-gliding, although I'm terrified of that sort of thing, just to test myself. And I haven't become a hang-gliding enthusiast, but I've done it. And I think it's that self image. So I mean I think I'm very open, I'm very kind of sensitive, I'm very true to myself but, but I've also got a carefully-honed public image, you know? I'm vainer than most people, well I don't know how vain most people are but I'm vain. Do you know what I mean? But we've always lived in a world, I suspect of, you know, from caveman times of such carefully controlled image. We're so like animals. I mean you watch, you know, birds or stags behaving in these kinds of ways and actually, you know, the line between us as human beings and them is incredibly thin and short. And I think, in saying I'm vain, what I'm not in any way pretending is that I spend hours in front of the mirror. What I'm saying is that, you know, we all have carefully-honed self images, whatever they are and actually in relationships most people see straight beyond that. And they certainly won't remember what you were wearing or what car you had. They either see a face that they like or a face they don't like. They see a smile or they see your eyes, you know...

Is it a Maya Angelou quote, the one about people will remember how you made them feel?

Yes. There you go.

So I ask everyone I chat with if they can come up with a *Little Challenge* and a *Little Challenge* is something that takes no more than 10 minutes to do. It doesn't require any particular physical skill or ability. It doesn't cost anything really. And it's something that could be life-enhancing in some way.

So here's something really simple, really rewarding and it's not that difficult. It's light a fire outside without using any matches or a lighter or whatever. Learn how to do that. It's not that complicated guys. And you'll find that you'll find endless methods of doing it on the Internet, but it's generally just a friction thing.

Yeah.

And when you've done it, you'll think, "Man, that was cool." Because fire, you know, fire and axes, which are two big interests of mine, are so primevally connected to us because they are two of the oldest tools known to mankind. And connecting with fire or an axe is, can be quite a profound experience and can lead to some really interesting things. And that is because we've been relating to these tools for thousands of years and there's an emotional connection to them. I mean, I think, light a fire without a match or chop some wood with an axe. I mean, you will be mind blown by... But be careful with the axe because actually people forget that they're dangerous. But you know, maybe maybe chop up some kindling with a hatchet. It's really powerful. And I think it is, it's giving us a sort of primeval connection.

And that sense of ritual that automatically appears when there's fire.

Yes, well fires are amazing things, but I'm a great advocate of making things because I'm particularly interested in craft for a number of reasons. But I think that the notion of flow, of being fully engaged in something, is incredibly meditatively powerful. And that isn't really distinguishable from meditation, in my experience. It's kind of the same thing. So making something *and* making fire is really interesting. And I think we should probably all know how to make fire, you know, I mean lest that skill be forgotten. And you know, a lot of people don't even know how to make a fire given some kindling and a firelighter and some matches. So chop up some kindling with an axe, but be careful, particularly of your legs, and try and set a fire without matches, but don't burn anything down.

Thank you. Thank you so much, Charlie.

No, my pleasure. What an interesting conversation.